

ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ

BY CHRISTOPHER KELLY

Green walls rolled toward me. My body slipped over the crests of the waves, instead of plowing through them as I had a mile back, when I had leapt from the shore of Alcatraz, an abandoned island prison in the middle of San Francisco Bay. I stroked faster as the cool October water surrounding me grew calm. Ahead I could see the narrow opening through which I had to swim. On shore would be a dry towel, trail mix, water and a 12 mile bicycle sprint. After that, the day would really begin—I would have to run almost 15 miles.

As a pool and open water swimmer, I used to believe that running should be reserved only for life-threatening situations—for example, if I were being chased by an angry Bengal tiger. Born with swimmer's feet (flat to the uninitiated) and a love for both competition and being in the water, my former belief may not surprise you. But I was in for a surprise when a team I had put together for one of the most challenging and unusual triathlons in America—the Dolphin Club's "Escape from Alcatraz"—fell apart and I decided to attempt all three events myself. I discovered that running can be both a fun and an efficient way to complement a swim-based exercise program.

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leg is a 1.4 mile swim from Alcatraz Island to Aquatic Park on the north shore of San Francisco. The 80 or so would-be escapers are taken by a morning ferry to the shore of Alcatraz. They jump over the side, wade up to the shore of the desolate island, wait for the blast of the ferry's air horn, and plow roughly south through the surf zone and across long, rolling waves that drowned many a hopeful convict of the past. Experienced pilots in hardy boats and on surf skis picket the escapers and guide them through the water.

The escapers stroke toward the opening of the concrete cove that protects the calm shore of Aquatic Park, the finish line for the swim. As they stroke south, up to 3-knot currents flowing both east and west must be crossed. Slower swimmers must ride the currents to reach the cove opening.

With a determined effort, fast swimmers can stroke through the cross currents without being pushed as far off course as a slower swimmer. The faster swimmer punches through the currents and straight into the cove opening. Before the event begins, there is a briefing for swimmers on current conditions. Aside from this information and their own good conditioning, escapers have only a swimsuit and neoprene cap on which to rely.

Photography by Caden Gray



My swim conditioning included both open water and pool workouts during the six months leading up to October. I started with one mile jaunts around the interior of the cove at Aquatic Park and slowly increased that distance as I began conditioning for the other two legs of the race. In the weeks leading up to the triathlon, I intentionally began to swim in conditions that simulated what the open bay would be like on the day of the Escape. Inside the cove, I swam against and through currents, winds that would rise to 15 miles per hour in the afternoon, and the long waves that roll through the cove opening. The advice of former escapers was a big help, but I got the *best* advice from two other sources: common sense and my own body.

I've found that stroke technique and sprinting tend to suffer when a swimmer with a lot of pool experience gets into an uninterrupted program of open water training. Without pool sprints and a wall to dash up to every 16 strokes, overall sprint speed goes down in open water. Sprinting makes a big difference when punching through a cross current, dashing into a narrow opening or passing a competitor. With no lane lines or walls in the way, a swimmer thinks less about a regular breathing pattern and good stroke technique than the position of pi-

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lots or the distance yet to stroke. It was for this reason that I pool trained at least once a week. Though freestyle is my stroke of choice in open water, I made a point of swimming repetitions of all the strokes. It kept my body flexible for the conditioning I needed for the other two legs of the Escape.

The escapers conclude the swim leg by strolling or staggering from the waves. They towel the seawater from their bodies, don socks and running shoes and climb onto bicycles. Thus begins a 12 mile ride to a small wooded town north of San Francisco, Mill Valley. The course first runs west through a former military base called the Presidio. Thanks to the early morning start time for the race, traffic is usually light, but

headwinds up to 10 miles per hour make escapers dig into the pedals. Astride the bicycle, the view north is inspiring—the blue bay, awesome gold Marin headlands, and the Golden Gate Bridge, orange-red against the morning sky.

The riders turn north and approach the windswept bridge, then weave through a moving obstacle course of pedestrians on the 10 foot wide walkway. The span bows upward slightly in the center, creating an uphill-downhill feel for the riders. The escapers continue to pedal north through Sausalito, zooming down twisting hills while steering clear of the many tourist-driven cars that congregate in this picturesque town. After the town limits, the course veers northwest on a paved trail across quiet wetlands and then to a main road that takes the escapers into a small schoolyard in Mill Valley. Here the final leg begins.

To train for the bicycle dash, I borrowed a decade-old road bicycle from a friend. It had twelve speeds and narrow rims, faster than the mountain bikes that most of the other escapers used. After swimming exclusively for so many years, the new sensation of speed and the new demands the bike put on my body were invigorating. Achieving the balance to take a downhill hairpin curve on a 7 per-

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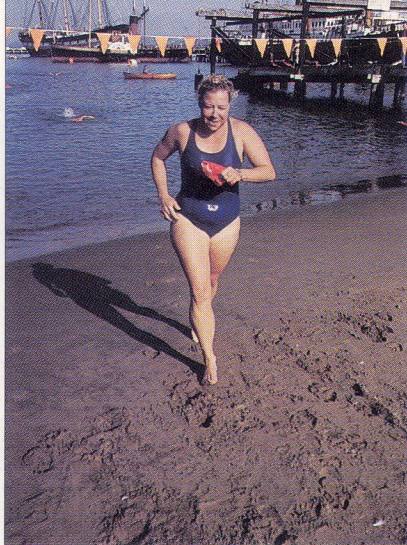
cent grade at high speed was a challenge that rivaled mastering the 50 Back. On a flat straightaway, the rush of wind and blood in my ears was as satisfying as feeling the water do the same in the 500 Free. I started riding three mile distances shortly after I began swim conditioning. I worked my way up to the twelve mile course about a month later.

The athletes sidle off their bicycles, stretch briefly, and begin the running portion of the Escape—a course so challenging that it has its own name: The Dipsea. The west-bound journey begins with a short dash through the schoolyard gates to the base of 671 stairs. After these, there are nearly a dozen hills to conquer on the way to the turnaround at Stinson Beach. Their names describe them aptly: Insult. Cardiac. Suicide. The courses rises 1910 feet in 4.3 miles and drops 1340 feet in 2.8 miles. The escapers storm up the steep hills and along dirt trails, across expansive grassland and through cool forests to the sea. Once on the beach, the runners turn around and dig in their heels for the return trip—giving the running leg of the

Escape its accurate name — Double Dipsea. Every year, some escapers lose their way because of the dense cover and trails that branch off from the correct one. A moaning bugle call jars the runners worn down by a succession of hills. The discordant blast spurs them to the summit. Fully stocked water tables await the escapers as they run past. Standing next to the table, the bugler puts down his horn and picks up banana slices and a paper cup of ice water. He reaches out with them to a flushed runner, the last of the small group that disappears into the wooded valley below.

It was only after I decided I would make the Escape solo that I remembered an important detail: the last time I ran more than a city block was well over a decade ago, when I ran the perimeter of the soccer field two days a week in junior high school. I figured I would start at the bottom by finding the right shoes. I applied some shopping tips I learned when looking for swim gear and found the perfect shoes almost immediately. Not long before, I had been looking around for a new pair of goggles. As I slipped the eighth pair over my head, I felt I'd found what I was looking for: the eyepieces hugged my eye sockets, creating a comfortable, water-tight fit. Finding the right shoes was much the same process, with the same feeling when I slipped the shoes over my feet and took them outside for a test drive.

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self for the run, I treated my body as gingerly as possible. Much to my surprise, I actually enjoyed this new workout. I'd heard the horror stories about shin splints and knee injuries and was afraid. I didn't wish to injure myself due to eagerness or fear. My swimmer's feet already presented enough of a threat. I started with a half mile a day on a paved surface, stretching thoroughly before and after. As I built up my distance and confidence, I began to switch from paved roads to sloping dirt trails close by my house. I ran the Double Dipsea twice before the Escape. Even so, I took a wrong turn that cost me 15 minutes.

Actually, I believe running enhanced my swimming performance. I felt more flexible in the water and my inhale felt deeper, allowing me to in-

crease my strokes between breaths in the water. I'm sure that my cycling added to the enhancement, but running 20 miles a week at my taper no doubt made its contribution. Moreover, the confidence that I built by overcoming my fear of running helps me face new challenges in and out of the pool to this day.

I ran through the hazy afternoon sunshine, the cheers and the schoolyard gates I had passed through two-and-a-half hours and 15 miles earlier. A massage table, a pair of expert hands, cold elixirs and true camaraderie were waiting for me. This is better than a swim meet, I thought to myself. Then I remembered that it was swim meets that had gotten me here. ♦

Photography by Janice Schultz

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